

PHILOSOPHY AS PROPHECY

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“I searched my soul.” Heraclitus

“To be intelligible and to be is the same thing.” Parmenides

**“He who sees things as a Whole is philosophical, he who doesn’t, isn’t.”
Plato**

Preface

‘Philosophy’ is a spacious notion hospitable to many senses, many usages, many practices. This essay is concerned with metaphysical philosophy, the quest for ultimate Reality, which I habitually refer to as philosophy proper. This genre of philosophy has in modern times been reviled, ridiculed, and designated nonsense. This undeserved disgrace has been brought on metaphysical philosophy by a gross misunderstanding of its true nature, a misunderstanding which philosophers, regrettably have shared and propagated.

Philosophy proper, philosophy as Plato understood it and practised it, seeks neither factual knowledge nor demonstrable truth. A philosopher probes her or his inner unfathomable and ineffable reality and expresses the insights she or he glimpses in myth, parable, and metaphor. That is also exactly what a poet does.

Philosophy begins with Socrates and ends with Plato. Before Socrates there were prognostications, mainly Heraclitus and Parmenides. After Plato, thanks to Aristotle, philosophy dropped in deep torpor. Even the profoundest of the moderns compromised their vision by thinking they were giving definitive demonstrative truth or an objective account. (Spinoza, Berkeley). Only poets and mystics had genuine metaphysical vision.

Basically the text is an abstract, hence the absence of citations and

references, but every bit of it has been worked out in detail over and over again in my writings over the past two decades.

The present work is a revised version of an essay I wrote in 2000 (if my memory serves me right) and published on the website I had at the time. A shorter version was prepared titled “A Confessed Heresy”. The text I reproduce here is a combination of these two that had been prepared for inclusion in *The Sphinx and the Phoenix* (2009).

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[This paper, as it appears here, is a fusion of the original essay under the same title with a shorter modified version titled “A Confessed Heresy”.]

PREFATORY NOTE

This paper voices a protest against the dominant trends in contemporary philosophy. I seek to present an unorthodox (though not quite original) conception of the nature of philosophical thinking. Since it is part of this conception that argument and proof have at best only an ancillary role to play in philosophy, I will not offer

any argument but will present a series of statements and reflections which, taken together, form what purports to be an internally coherent position.

The conception I wish to advance goes back to Socrates. I maintain that Socrates was the first and perhaps the only philosopher who had a true insight into the proper nature of philosophical thinking; and that though Plato with his inimitable dramatic genius has preserved for us in his early dialogues the true Socratic insight, he himself possibly wavered in his grasp of that insight. Ever since, philosophical thinking has been beset by two illusions: (1) the illusion that philosophy can, or is meant to, give us objective knowledge; and (2) the illusion that philosophical statements need or are susceptible of demonstrative proof.

I maintain that philosophical

thinking is creative, concerned with generating ideas and ideals that give meaning and value to the world and to human life and that it is necessary that philosophers go back to the Socratic insight and realize the radical distinction between philosophy on the one hand and natural science and mathematics on the other hand.

I. THE SOCRATIC INSIGHT

Socrates was first and foremost concerned with the ideas and ideals that give meaning and value to human life and that constitute the humanity of humankind. He was convinced that those ideas and ideals are not to be found in nature, but only in the human mind. They do not come to us from outside ourselves and cannot be discovered in the objective world. Philosophy does not seek and cannot give us knowledge of the world, of anything objective, but seeks and gives us understanding of what is of most concern to us.

This, in my view, is the meaning we should attach to Socrates' insist-

ence on the principle of philosophical ignorance as the ground of all wisdom. We can never understand anything beyond the immediacy of the idea. It is the idea that is real and gives reality to all things in the world. When we seek to grasp the essence of those very ideas that are all the reality we know, they elude us and merge into each other, and the only reality we are left with is the activity of our mind in its quest for understanding. And that activity, rather creativity, of the mind that is the only reality we have immediate and indubitable awareness of, is our special excellence as human beings. Hence Socrates identified *phronêsis* (intelligence) with *arête* (virtue). Intellectual and moral integrity are one and the same thing. That one reality we know, that one virtue we have, is 'that in us which thrives by doing good and is harmed by doing ill.

II. PHILOSOPHY DOES NOT YIELD KNOWLEDGE

In turning away from physical speculation, Socrates drew a clear line between science and philosophy proper. It is essential that we let that distinction stand out in the clearest light. Philosophical thinking is a creative activity that brings into being ideal (conceptual) patterns which transform the mute givenness of the world into an intelligible reality. The difference between scientific knowledge and philosophic understanding can best be explained by the example given by Socrates in the *Phaedo* (St.98c-99a). Socrates is seated on a bed in his prison. Physiology telling us of his

bones, muscles and tendons gives us knowledge about his posture. Philosophy telling us of his ideas of honour, loyalty and justice gives us understanding of his being there in his Athens prison rather than with Crito's friends in Thessaly.

While philosophy does not give us factual information about the world, the methods and procedures which give us objective knowledge can never answer any of our philosophical questions. I can know things, manipulate them and put them to good use or – alas! more often – to bad use. But I don't understand them. I can only understand my ideas because they are my own creation (or the creation of minds akin to my own), and I understand them not by dissecting or analyzing them but by embracing them with the innocence of a simple child; by foolishly affirming with Socrates, 'It is by Beauty

that a beautiful thing is beautiful’.

Philosophy speaks of one reality, the sole primary reality that we know immediately: our own creative intelligence. All the other realities it tells us about, are realities it creates, are myths that constitute the only world in which we live as intelligent, rational beings, the world of the spiritual life, of reason, ideals and values. Science tells us about nebulae, black holes, electrons, quarks, but tells us nothing about our own reality or the realities that constitute our human life or the unrealities (false ideals and values) that damage and pervert human life. There is more meaning and wisdom in a tale of Hans Christian Andersen than in the works of Newton, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking combined.

No amount of facts can explain a reality. Life is an idea, a reality, a mystery. Biologists, microbiologists,

biochemists, can add to our objective knowledge about the constitution and the processes of living things, but life will remain what it is and has always been for us, a creative idea, a reality, a mystery. Neuroscientists and psychologists can go on doing fruitful research and amassing facts and advancing admirable theories, but consciousness, thought, mind, feeling, understanding — all of these will remain what they are, realities and mysteries.

Philosophy does not, like science, discover facts, objective truth; philosophy does not, like mathematics, deduce logical certainties, demonstrable truth. If we have to speak of truth at all in connection with philosophy, we must say that philosophy, like a poem, like a symphony, creates its own truth. Philosophy, properly, is oracular.

III. CREATIVE INTELLIGENCE

Our ideas constitute the intelligible cosmos in which we live the life of intelligent beings. Any coherent system of ideas constitutes a particular universe of discourse. When Socrates says, ‘I would rather suffer wrong than commit wrong’, this statement is neither analytic nor verifiable. It is creative; it gives us a meaningful world in which we live on a new plane of being, the moral plane.

It is in creating and by creating our own ideal world that we perceive, know, understand that world. In a Humean world state B succeeds state A without any connection between the two states. It is only by virtue of

the audacious idea – that can never be proved, never justified, never explained – that state A causes state B, that we live in a meaningful world, have consciousness, and have self-identity. This I call a creative idea.

When we state that ideas stem from the mind, the question we are addressing is not, Where do ideas come from?, for the separation of the mind and sense-experience is no more than a fiction. The important consideration is that when ideas grow out of sense-experience they grow into and constitute a new plane of being.

All reasoning must rest ultimately on a creatively posited idea. The ideas of infinity, nothingness, perfection, equally with the ideas of justice or equality, can never be found in the world. They are not ‘out there’ to be discovered. They are creations of the mind. The only being they have is their being in the ideal universe.

No original thinker has ever reached any of his most fecund thoughts by an inferential process. The thought always comes as a creative resolution to a perplexity, arraying the elements of the perplexity in a whole in which they obtain intelligibility.

Spinoza advances the substance of his great *Ethics* in the eight ‘definitions’ and seven axioms with which he begins. In the subsequent ‘geometrical demonstration’ he unfolds, develops, and weaves together those original concepts.

IV. ONLY WHAT IS WHOLE IS REAL

Our only contact with reality is in the totality of immediate experience as creative intelligence. I call this the wholeness of the act. While only what is whole is real, reasoning can only operate by breaking up the totality; yet the moment it does, it is enmeshed in falsehood. It can only redeem itself by acknowledging that its analytical proceeding is a necessity to be humbly endured, rather than a virtue to be vaunted.

Substance and properties, universals and particulars, subject and object, mind and body, form and content, are all fruitful distinctions, the

indispensible tools of conceptual thinking; but once we take the theoretical separation seriously, once we take the distinctions for more than useful fictions, treating the distinct concepts as actualities, we fall into the sin of fragmenting the total act and are trapped in a veritable labyrinth of endless controversy.

When Plato sins by taking ‘that in us which prospers by good deeds and is maimed by bad deeds’ as not only conceptually distinct from the body, but as factually separate from it; when he takes the distinction for more than a fecund myth and regards soul and body as objective existents, he plunges philosophical thinking into the labyrinthine dungeon from which it has been ever since vainly labouring to extricate itself.

Philosophers nowadays think that the more finely they pulverize their subject-matter, the closer they

get to the ever elusive goal of grasping reality. They don't realize that quite on the contrary, the more they pound their material the farther removed they are from living reality. It is not for philosophy to examine things piecemeal. It is the hallmark of philosophy to aim at the comprehensive view, to connect issues, to see all questions as aspects of one underlying problem. Contemporary philosophers revel in the piecemeal. Well and good, if this is taken as a step in a wider-ranging movement; but to stop at that is to negate the philosophic endeavour.

V. PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENTS ARE NOT PROVABLE

Philosophical statements are not susceptible of proof: they do not follow necessarily from premises. A philosophical statement is an intelligible whole. Its intelligibility is its reality and is of the nature of the aesthetic coherence of a symphony or a poem. The rationality of philosophy does not consist in submission to any formal logic but in complete adherence to intellectual integrity; in its uncompromising demand for intelligibility.

Deductive thinking always proceeds within a closed system. In *Phaedrus* 245c-246a there is a close-knit argument that Aristotle must

have coveted. Cogent and precise and elegant, no argument could have been more plausible. And yet what does it ‘prove’? Nothing but the metaphysical reality of the idea as a creatively meaningful notion/. The argument roams and rambles within the universe of the idea. It neither derives the idea of the soul – of the self-moving, self-positing being – from anything outside of it, nor steps out of the idea to anything outside of it. The whole argument is a display of the idea. To my mind, this shows the true nature of philosophical thinking. It is not deductive; it is not inductive; it is not demonstraative: it is creative.

The argument of a good philosophical essay – short or of book-length – is never a chain of syllogisms. It can best be characterized as an aesthetically satisfying mosaic of related ideas and relevant instances, a landscape of a region of human experience.

What gives that mosaic, that landscape, its significance, its truthfulness? It is truthful in such measure as it reflects our internal reality and has its significance in revealing to us that reality.

So modern philosophers with all their arguments, analyses, refutations and counter-refutations have been ploughing the sand because they overlooked the fact that philosophy is not concerned with truth and falsity but with meaningfulness.

Properly, philosophy is not inferential but oracular. He understands the true nature of philosophy best who, like Nietzsche, speaks in aphorisms and paradoxes.

VI. ALL DETERMINATE THOUGHT INVOLVES FALSE- HOOD

Philosophical thinking cannot pretend to finality. There are no absolutely true statements. No concept, however precise, can be free of contradiction. Every determinate thought can be shown to involve falsehood. The moment we articulate a thought and give it a determinate form, we necessarily infect it with the contradictoriness inherent in all finitude. All the refinements of logic, sophisticated notations, quantifications, etc., will not cure the disease inherent in all determinate thought. The disease is not in the symbols or

formulae but in the content we put into them. Be the formal language as perfect as it may, the moment we try to give it substance by assigning to its variables determinate values, we find these necessarily carrying within them the corruption that is inherent in all existence, in all finitude and all particularity. Any doctrine, any theory, is a myth that has to be taken with the urbanity of well-bred society that winks at a tall yarn.

In the early dialogues of Plato, every definition advanced, every position propounded, is shown to be wanting: in the modern jargon, for every definition and every position a counter-example is readily provided. The whole history of philosophy and especially the whole course of philosophical controversy throughout the past century are evidence enough that no theory, no principle, no tenet is immune to this fate.

Philosophers, faced with such a contradiction, instead of simply acknowledging that it is in the nature of all thought to be contradictory, posit distinctions and hypotheses that in turn prove to be contradictory, and find themselves in an interminable maze. When they prove one another wrong and end up all looking ludicrous, what lands them in this quandary is not want of brains but want of humility. They should realize that all determinate thought, in striving after truth, can only capture half-truths that can only be redeemed of falsehood by recognizing their essential imperfection.

A relatively coherent statement gives understanding; its criticism gives us understanding; but once we regard either the original statement or the criticism as anything more than a parable – once we seek to endow either with finality – we are in

the shackles of dogma, which is compounded ignorance: we do not know and do not know that we do not know. Even the most carefully worked out scientific theses, if seen as anything but provisional approximations, bear the twin curse: exposing us to vane hubris and blocking the way to further advance.

The subjective immediacies of experience are incommunicable while language is communication. A language to be effective must be shared and it can only be shared by denoting generalities and all generality is nebulous and obscure. The quest for a perfect language is a wild-goose chase. And this is a blessing in disguise. If we had a perfect language, language would no longer be a tool we possess; we would be tools somnambulantly acting out operations dictated by our language programme.

Philosophy is creative thinking. The

end-product of thinking, accomplished thought, by the very fact that it is a finished product, stands at variance with the reality of thinking. Hence to claim to give any definitive expression of philosophical insight is to belie the nature of philosophical insight.

We are told that the business of logic is to ascertain that the inference shall be true if the premises are true. All this really amounts to is that logic assumes the role of an umpire that sees to it that the game is played according to rule. If it is, the inference is formally correct: but is it true? Yes, if the premises are true. But there's the rub: no premise is ever simply and absolutely true. We tolerate a proposition as long as it serves our purposes, but in every case and at all times we can choose to introduce a refinement or a distinction that renders it untrue, since it is in the nature

of all determinate thought to be immersed in falsity.

Logic is definitely a tool that philosophers may use to introduce some order into their intellectual larder. It contributes nothing of substance. It can prove nothing by its own native powers. Philosophers and logicians surely know all this at heart, and yet they often behave as if they expected their sophistications to yield truth and certainty. They seem to stand very much in need of the foolish little child that will cry out, ‘The Emperor has no clothes on!’

Truth, with a capital T, is ineffable. The gods jealously keep it within their own minds. They only vouchsafe us humans the utterance of half-truths. He only is wise who, like Socrates, knows that he cannot speak the whole truth or even so much as the whole of a single instance of truth.

VII. PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING IS MYTHICAL

We know Reality immediately in only intelligent creative activity. It is in the creativity of intelligence that we obtain reality, become real ourselves, and in becoming real come to know what Reality is like.

Philosophy is a creation of the mind, an expanse of intelligibility and hence of reality. Philosophy does not reflect reality but, out of the reality of the philosopher's creative intelligence, it brings forth a new order of reality. The philosopher, equally with the poet and the artist, creates life-giving visions.

Philosophy seeks to give expression to Reality, and Reality as perfection transcends all determination, all finitude, all particularity; but thought can only be determinate, finite, particularized. Hence, all philosophical thought is allegorical, expresses itself in myth. To overlook this is to destroy philosophy.

Since understanding is not a passive reception of a meaning or truth or whatever, coming from outside us, but is a creative generation of a pattern in which the reality of our inner intelligence obtains fugitive actuality, thereby conferring meaning on the dumb givennesses of raw experience — then myth must necessarily be our only conveyance to understanding.

A system of philosophy can be as rational as Aristotle's, as Leibniz', as Bradley's; yet the concepts used in building any such system correspond to nothing actually existing. They are

manners of presenting the totality of experience in an intelligible universe. They are ideal constructs or rational myths: they give us coherent prospects that satisfy our understanding; they give us patterns through which we can exercise our intelligence, through which we can confer reality on the fleeting actuality of our existence. Yet any thinker can take those conceptual systems and, taking them to aim at giving factual knowledge, show them one and all to be erroneous and contradictory. So philosophers do quite well when they create their myths. But when they forget that the myths are their own creations and start dealing with their vidioms as actualities, they find themselves in deep trouble.

I ask of a philosopher what I ask of a poet — to give me a vision, then leave me at liberty to make of it what I will. The great creative philosophers

have given us worlds to live in. I live in the world of Spinoza as much as in that of Berkeley, in the world of Whitehead as much as in that of Bradley, in the world of Santayana as much as in that of Schopenhauer. A philosopher that makes it his business to demolish a rival vision teaches me nothing, enriches me in no way.

Let us by all means criticize Plato and Spinoza and Berkeley. But we will never come into possession of the treasures of wisdom and insight they left us until we embrace their great parables with the innocence of the little child entering heart and soul and mind into the enchanted world her grandma unfolds to her in fairy tales — alas! gone are the days when little children naively walked hand in hand with fairies and philosophers foolishly embraced Reality and Truth; in this our digital age lower-case reality and truth are good enough for us,

though we know for a certainty that we can never lay hold of even these.

Just as we have discovered that we can have different geometries, so we have to, and hopefully will, accustom ourselves to the idea of having different metaphysical vistas and panoramas, in other words, different universes of discourse. We can have a Platonic, an Aristotelian, a Leibnizean, a Kantian, a Hegelian, a Bergsonian universe of discourse: these are all equally valid though they may not be equally valuable. Just as, once we free ourselves of religious dogma, we can find meaning and beauty in Greek, Hindu, Hebrew or Christian mythology, so when we rid ourselves of the delusion that there is one true philosophy, we will find meaning and value in all philosophical visions.

We are all children playing at building sandcastles on the ocean

shore of Reality. This is not a counsel of despair, but of sagacity. It means we must humbly accept our limitations and redeem our original sin of finite existence by avowing that all of our wisdom and all of our philosophy is mythology.

VIII. THE FUTILITY OF DISPUTATION

All argument involves the introduction of distinctions and the election of a specific perspective. The perspective and the distinctions provide a view that has in it a certain level of reality but that is necessarily partial and relative and in a measure false.

Two analyses of an initial situation, two theories, are not exclusive alternatives, one of which being true the other must be false. They are descriptions from different viewpoints, both in principle equally true and equally false. That is why any theory can and will be countered with cogent objections.

We should distinguish between positive criticism (dialectic) and negative refutation (eristic). Positive criticism of a philosophical position, starting from the necessary insufficiency of all conceptual formulations, develops a new position fully knowing that this in turn will necessarily prove to be insufficient. Mere refutation is juggling with words. You can only refute a thesis proposed by a thoughtful person by adducing to the terms she or he employs other meanings; by shifting the boundaries of the distinctions she or he made, ignoring the fact that those distinctions can, in the nature of things, be nothing but *ad hoc*.

Philosophers argue as if a word, taken in isolation, can have a meaning. A word only has meaning within a particular universe of discourse and within that universe of discourse takes different shades and tones in

different contexts. It is obtuse to oppose Spinoza's 'substance' to Locke's 'substance', Berkeley's 'idea' to Hume's 'idea', Aristotle's 'being' to Bradley's 'being'.

Scholars speak of Theory of Knowledge as if there is or should be or can be one correct theory of knowledge, and when scholars speak of theories of knowledge in the plural they imply that the various theories are conflicting hypotheses, in varying degrees incompatible with the one true account of knowledge. I maintain that there can be no such thing as the Theory of Knowledge because there is no fixity or finality in the domain of the mind. I maintain that we should always speak of a theory of knowledge as a particular representation, from a particular perspective, of the activity and the content of the mind.

Disputation in philosophy is a

game, a play with concepts. It can be an interesting game, pleasant and useful in that it keeps our minds alert and breaks down the casings that thought is doomed ever to set up and ever to demolish on pain of being suffocated to extinction. But it must always be consciously practised as a game. The moment we start taking it too seriously, the moment we imbue its terms with finality, we negate its utility; we turn it from a harmless game into a sin, from a liberating exercise into a fossilizing idolatry.

Philosophy cannot live except in an atmosphere permeated with the salubrious air of critical examination; in its subsidiary disciplines it has to make use of the methods and procedures of the sciences. But the arguments prove nothing. The arguments discover the implications of the ideas creatively posited. In its creative

work, philosophy has no place for argumentation.

IX. RATIONALITY

Philosophy is distinct from religion and mythology, but a philosophy that is not concerned with the ultimate questions of meaning and value addressed by religion and mythology is no philosophy. Philosophy is distinct from science, but a philosophy not possessed of the rationality and intellectual integrity of science, is no philosophy. Thought becomes rational when it frankly and urbanely submits itself to questioning.

The ever-renewed philosophic endeavour is a persistent movement towards greater consistency and clarity in our thinking, a movement which can never come to an end – or,

should never come to an end – because thought can never adequately represent reality: When thought thinks itself adequate to reality, it is no longer living but fossilized.

When I deny that philosophical thinking is argumentative, I only mean to deny that philosophy reaches its main principles and most fecund ideas inferentially. Those principles and ideas always issue creatively. But then there is another aspect of philosophy, which I stress when I insist on the necessity of rationality. To satisfy its vital need for rationality, philosophy makes use of dialectic (critical examination) as a method for realizing clarity and consistency in ideas; for integrating our ideas into an intrinsically coherent whole: since that vital need for rationality is nothing but the need of the mind for wholeness, the need to be whole and to realize itself in wholes.

What we should aim at in reasoning, the sole thing we can achieve by reasoning, is not absolute truth or certainty, but the highest attainable measure of harmony in our thought, the highest possible integrity of our mind. That simply is what it means to be rational: not to have sound knowledge or definitive theories or doctrines, but to be whole and sound in mind.

We, students of philosophy, all of us, have betrayed Father Socrates, and the nemesis of our betrayal is the maze we find ourselves in. Even divine Plato often sinned, seduced by the lure of finality and certainty.

Present-day philosophers will ‘describe’, paraphrase, quantify “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”, and we end up with no beauty, no joy and no duration. I want back the beauty and the joy even if not for ever but only for a passing moment.

I do not believe in the immortality of the soul and Plato does not pretend that any of the arguments in the *Phaedo* for the immortality of the soul are conclusive; yet reading the *Phaedo* gives me possession of – puts me in communion with – ‘that in us which flourishes by what is right and withers by what is wrong’. This is the true work of prophetic philosophy.

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